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Previous Story

Next Story

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By PAUL HAMPTON

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GULFPORT -- The man at the center of the Harrison County controversy over access to records from the June 24 Republican runoff for U.S. Senate was a GOP election worker in one of the key counties in the dispute.

Phil Harding, who had identified himself as "just a volunteer" when talking about examination of Harrison County poll books, was also the District 4 Coordinator in the runoff.

He said that on July 1 as he and other workers were cleaning out supply bins at the Election Commission office in Gulfport, they found some absentee ballot bags. He said some of them were empty but some of them had absentee applications, which should have been kept as part of the record of the vote.

"I did see some go in the trash," he said. "I'd rather not name names."

Harding said he didn't put any of them in the trash personally and he signed an affidavit with True the Vote, the Texas-based group that is suing over the election records, detailing what he saw. He said that affidavit was available on the Internet but True the Vote, when contacted, said the only affidavit that had been filed in the suit was from Noxubee County.

Harding said some members of the county Republican Executive Committee were present.

Al Hopkins, chairman of the executive committee, was not immediately available for comment, said a receptionist at his office.

The McDaniel campaign is trying to find enough illegal votes and other evidence of fraud to force a new runoff election. The campaign has said it will have a news conference Wednesday to discuss its progress. The Cochran campaign says there were few illegal votes found and denies there was any fraud in the election on its part.

The campaign sued Harrison County over access to the election materials but Circuit Clerk Gayle Parker, the custodian of the records, said she has given the campaign everything it has asked and paid for. The clerk is charging the campaign for the cost of gathering and redacting personal information from the records. She said they have all the poll books requested by the campaign ready to be examined as soon it pays the \$725 to cover the cost. The actual voting was overseen by the GOP.

Parker said she had seven or eight employees work until about 7 p.m. Friday to get the books ready.

In an emergency appeal Monday afternoon, McDaniel's attorney asked the state Supreme Court order that original records that haven't been redacted be turned over immediately and then give his team 12 days to examine them before deciding whether to challenge the election.

